

Desktop-publishing software

Important print projects require the quality and care that only a desktop-publishing program can provide. Adam Banks looks at four that aim to give your publications a professional finish

Desktop-publishing (DTP) software is the missing link between word processing and the production of fully realised publications such as this magazine. Sure, you can use a word processor to create pages that incorporate formatted text and pictures, and Microsoft Word now has some sophisticated layout capabilities. However, while that may be enough to get you an impressive-looking report or a decent brochure, only a DTP package will enable you to create a full range of professionally laid-out documents.

One thing that distinguishes a book, magazine or newspaper from normal word-processor output is that they are printed on both sides of the paper and bound at the edge. When you open them you don't see one page at a time, but a double-page spread (DPS). The DPS needs to be designed as such. The pages are symmetrical, so the width of the left margin on the left page must match the right margin on the right page. Modern word processors go this far, but they don't let you edit the pages of a DPS side by side, or allow graphics to span across the join or 'gutter'. This is vital for serious layout work. Top-end DTP programs also allow for complex printed layouts such as gatefolds.

FONT OF KNOWLEDGE

Although PC users are accustomed to a wide choice of fonts and formatting, word processors still don't set type very well. You can adjust the spacing between characters ('kerning') and between lines ('leading'), but you don't get the full, flexible control that you need to define and balance word and letter spacing, especially

in justified text. You also don't get options such as optical spacing, where the software intelligently kerns larger text based on the character shapes. While Word offers plenty of tacky text effects, you can't typeset a headline, convert it into a graphical shape, edit the shape and flow other text inside it, for example.

Furthermore, you don't get subtle effects such as shadows and glows, or controllable transparency. Once you do have an item looking exactly the way you want it, it's not easy to apply the same style to other elements. In addition, although you can place text boxes and pictures anywhere on a page, it can be a hassle to ensure items are placed precisely and don't move around, or to adjust the exact positioning of text reliably within a frame.

EXTRA, EXTRA

However, certain features that you might take for granted in a word processor don't come as standard in DTP software. There's some support for such things as indexing and footnotes, but it may feel cumbersome. Mailmerge facilities are also less common. The leading DTP packages can produce complex database-driven publishing projects, such as catalogues in multiple international editions, but you need high-end plug-ins and bespoke systems; it's not something you can get out of the box.

There have never been that many DTP programs on the market, and this time we found only four current mainstream packages. We have reviewed them all here so you can see how they measure up.

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Commercial enterprise Preparing for commercial printing

Any job that you can't output on your own inkjet or laser printer must be sent for commercial printing. The most common option is offset litho, as used for this magazine, but digital presses are more cost-effective for anything up to around 500 copies. Either way, you need to prepare your document correctly. The RGB colour format used for desktop printing is no good. You must use the CMYK format for full-colour documents (anything involving photos), or spot colour if you want black text plus one or more specific solid colours (called Pantones). All the programs here offer these options.

The printer needs three things: the layout itself, the images and the fonts. You can supply the document file along with the image and font files; all the programs have a package command that will put these together for you. Many printers accept this for QuarkXPress and Adobe InDesign, but few handle Microsoft Publisher or Serif PagePlus files. Alternatively, you can turn your document into a 'press-ready' Adobe Portable Document



▲ *Shopper* is produced in InDesign and converted to PDF files, which include images and fonts, before it is sent to the printer

Format (PDF) file with the images and fonts embedded. All the programs have this facility, but only QuarkXPress and InDesign offer adequate control over formatting. PagePlus appears to output usable PDFs, but we weren't completely happy with its handling. Microsoft Publisher has a free add-on that outputs PDFs, but you'd be better off finding a printer that's familiar with Publisher – if one exists.

ADOBE InDesign CS3

★★★★★

COMPUTER
SHOPPER
BEST BUY

£680 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

In the 1990s Adobe's PageMaker, the original DTP program, was edged out by QuarkXPress. Adobe eventually ditched it and started again from scratch. InDesign has a notably fresh feel, as if it's just getting into its stride rather than struggling to keep up, and it looks fitter with each release.

In CS3 (version 5), the user interface has been tidied up, with InDesign's many palettes arranged on the right-hand side. You can customise these and move them around if you like, but the new pop-out structure makes it easier to keep the screen clear of clutter, while still allowing you to get at what you want without having to hunt for it. The floating Control palette isn't divided into tabs like QuarkXPress 7's, but just shows all the options relevant to the item and tool selected. This works fine, although it's long enough to disappear off the edge of smaller screens. As before, it's very easy to switch the editing window between showing guides, grids and other layout furniture, or just your page as it'll look when printed, and to

reduce the display quality if you need to work faster, although InDesign rarely feels slow.

The already-impressive soft shadows have been rolled into a full Object Effects dialog that is almost identical to the Photoshop equivalent. This gives you lots of creative options, including glows, bevels and embosses. All that's missing is the ability to edit and adjust photos in situ. This is left to Photoshop, while warping and advanced vector-editing are left to Illustrator.

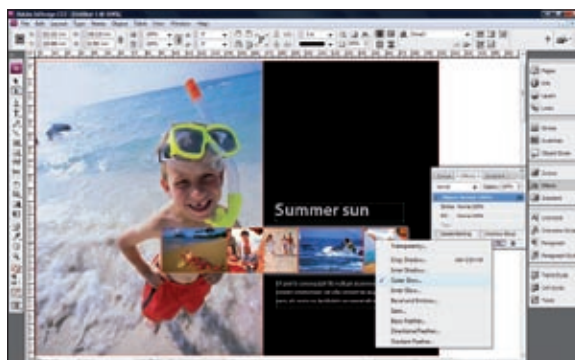
Nesting is a powerful idea that's exclusive to InDesign. You can create a master page based on another, enabling more organised templating for long or repeat publications such as catalogues

and magazines. Paragraph styles can contain character styles so, for example, the opening paragraph of a story can automatically have the first three words set in a different font, size and colour. Table styles make it even easier to format an imported table with just a few clicks.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Practical and creative tools
- ✓ Easy to find your way around
- ✗ Potentially daunting features

DTP SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2 or Vista (not Basic), Pentium 4 processor or later, 1GB RAM, 1.8GB disk space
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk



▲ InDesign offers an exhaustive range of professional features

CS3 has lots of new automation features. You can import multiple text items or images simultaneously and then carry them around, attached to your cursor, while you place them where you want them. An expanded Find/Change function lets you alter text or graphics throughout a document. There's more advanced scripting and XML support (both input and output), as well as integration with Dreamweaver if you're working on both web and print content. Finally, you can now place one InDesign layout within another and track changes to it via the Links palette. This means another user can work on the document at the same time.

InDesign stakes the best claim to being the future of DTP. It's not cheap, but it's worth the price, and even better value as part of the Creative Suite bundle with Photoshop, Illustrator and other options.

QUARK QuarkXPress 7.31

★★★★★

£868 inc VAT

From www.jigsaw24.com

Last time we reviewed DTP software (*Shopper* 213), QuarkXPress was at version 6.5, the latest in a series of upgrades that failed to do it justice. Version 7 marked a change in attitude. Quark became more accessible, adding lots of helpful advice to its website, listening to users' comments, and launching www.ilovedesign.com, a graphics community showcase.

QuarkXPress 7 also comes with a good manual.

Several incremental upgrades have tied up loose ends and added presets for such things as PDF output in an attempt to address the criticism that certain features were too hard to use. Even now, though, few users will get to grips with Job Jackets, a comprehensive system for managing and controlling the way documents are formatted and delivered for printing, or Composition Zones, a clever but confusing method of allowing multiple users to work on parts of a document independently.

Features everyone will appreciate include highly controllable soft shadows that, unlike InDesign's, can be applied independently to text and its containing frame. Picture Effects allow you to

tweak photos within your layouts, and you get excellent control over placed multi-layer PSD (Photoshop) files. In fact, if you already use other Creative Suite applications, that isn't a strong reason to stick with InDesign, as QuarkXPress works with them quite well, too.

XPert Tools Pro, a bundled set of plug-ins, adds functions such as layers and object styles to catch up with InDesign CS3. Also included is Quark Interactive Designer, an attempt to integrate web-design tools with page layout. It's not an approach many serious web designers would favour, but if you need to produce Flash-based content and don't want to invest time or money in a separate product, it's a bonus.

QuarkXPress 7 certainly provides all the essentials and, considering the company's expertise in integrating with content-management systems, it's a compelling product for publishers with complex requirements. For the rest of us, however, its advantages over InDesign are less obvious than



▲ QuarkXPress 7's built-in image-adjustment tools are a boon

its shortcomings. Quark may be friendlier now, but QuarkXPress isn't. You get nothing but a blank screen on startup, and no templates or clip art. The user interface, while neat, has too many idiosyncrasies, and the use of tabs to switch between different functions of the main Measurements palette is awkward. There are frustrating gaps in the Undo function, such as moving pages in the Pages palette, which can be a pain to reverse manually. Shadows aside, effects and transparency are still limited. It will be interesting to see if version 8, which should be available soon, addresses these problems.

There's simply no excuse for QuarkXPress to cost more than InDesign. If you buy InDesign as part of Creative Suite, which many users will want for Photoshop and Illustrator, the numbers look even worse for Quark. Quark's upgrade deal is more attractive at around £300, but otherwise, InDesign is the better bet.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Extensive and usable features
- ✓ Image adjustment tools built in
- ✗ Poor value for most users

DTP SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2 or Vista, 1GB RAM, 450MB disk space
DETAILS www.quark.co.uk

MICROSOFT Office Publisher 2007



£151 inc VAT
From www.amazon.co.uk

When you start Microsoft Office Publisher 2007, you're offered a choice of templates for almost any kind of publication. Some are themed by style, so you can mix and match, and they even have colour schemes, so you can change the look with a single click. This is a great idea, and there are plenty of templates supplied, with more available to download. The trouble is they're all terrible.

We're not saying some of them aren't very good; we're saying every single one is very bad. Typography, graphics and layout are all below the lowest imaginable quality threshold. Aesthetics aside, the templates make no use of master pages and many don't even have column guides defined, which makes it difficult even to start customising them.

If you want decent results you're on your own, and that's not much fun, either. All the basic layout functions are catered for. You can edit facing pages together, create and apply master pages, place and crop pictures, wrap text around them and flow it between columns. However,

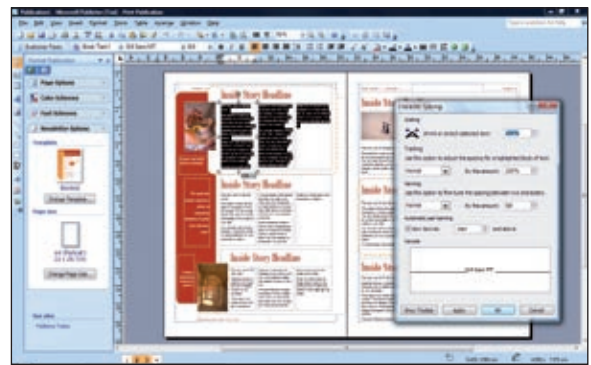
the interface doesn't feel as if it was created by or for anyone who lays out pages regularly. Replace a picture with another, for example, and instead of appearing in the same frame the new one arrives at its own size and shape. Typographic controls are too limited, and effects such as customisable shadows and glows are absent.

Some 'professional' features have been added, but they often miss the point. The Design Checker offers a form of pre-flighting (spotting wrongly formatted pictures or overflowed text) but messes up the way you select which errors to look for, so it's all but useless. The Commercial Printing Tool can convert a document to spot

colour, automatically duotone any photos to use the selected inks, which would be useful if you had any say in the process. It can also convert to CMYK, but this removes any transparency effects. The PDF add-in gives you a few choices, including allegedly press-ready output, but the default settings

lead you astray (for example, disabling bleed) and there's too little control overall. The option to create your own trapping settings, something high-end users would rarely tackle, is laughable in a product of this calibre.

The price might be reasonable for a budget offering – if the product were a lot better, and PagePlus wasn't available for less than half the price. As well as being sold as a standalone product, Office Publisher comes with the Small Business, Professional, Ultimate and Enterprise editions of Microsoft Office 2007. It ought to be in the Home and Student Edition, as kids are often asked to produce posters and newsletters as part of the National Curriculum and tend to do it in PowerPoint, which is hopelessly ill-suited. However, even the Academic Edition of Publisher costs around £85 including VAT. At these prices, we can't recommend it.



▲ Publisher 2007's typographic tools are limited and lack effects

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy for Word users to work out
- ✗ Limited type and layout controls
- ✗ 'Pro' features lack credibility

DTP SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2 or later, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB disk space
DETAILS www.microsoft.co.uk

SERIF PagePlus X2



£68 inc VAT
From www.amazon.co.uk

Taking most of its features from Adobe and Quark, PagePlus couldn't be accused of wild innovation – but there's nothing wrong with that. If you've used DTP software before, you'll feel at home. If not, there's plenty of help to get you started, which is unique in this field.

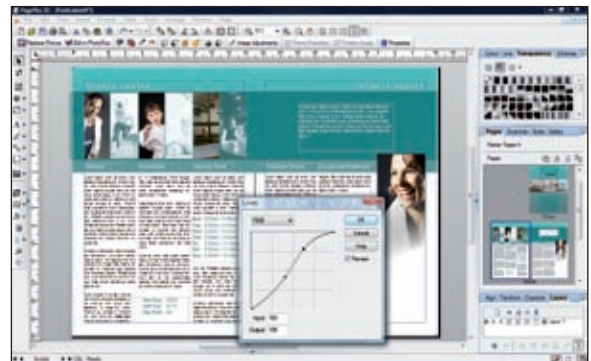
We were pleased with Serif's templates compared with Microsoft's. While quantity is more limited, quality is commendable. Options include calendars, complete with the ability to add your own red-letter days to the standard holidays. There's also some good photo clip art. Templates are divided into desktop printing and commercial printing categories, the latter featuring multi-page formats with full bleed, where the graphics go to the edges of the page.

PDF creation is reasonably convincing, with presets such as the PDF/X-1 standards, which are widely used to ensure compatibility when sending layouts to print or submitting advertising copy to magazines and newspapers. Unlike its pricier rivals, PagePlus includes imposition, which is the arrangement of pages on to a larger sheet ready to print and fold. Commercial printers do

their own imposition, but this is handy for printing small booklets on a desktop printer.

Colours are converted to CMYK by default, bypassing the common error of leaving non-process colours in your output (which won't print), and you can also use spots. However, some advanced output controls, including transparency flattening, are limited and poorly documented, so we wouldn't be as confident supplying press-ready PDFs from this as we would from QuarkXPress or InDesign.

The interface is well designed. As in InDesign CS3, the Pages palette shows thumbnails of your layouts rather than blank symbols. There's a handy Media Bar on to which you can drag images before placing them on a page. Master pages are adequately supported, and while you don't get InDesign's nesting capability you can apply a master to each layer on a page. There are table-of-contents and indexing features, mailmerge and (as with Adobe and Quark) the facility to create a book consisting of



▲ PagePlus offers the features of Quark and InDesign at a cut price

multiple layout files. Typographic control is good, complete with optical justification, where margins are made to look straighter by taking character shapes into account; InDesign has this feature, but not QuarkXPress.

You get soft shadows as flexible as Quark's and effects as plentiful as Adobe's, plus an unrivalled variety of ready-made texture and 3D effects. Serif's unusual transparency masking can be unwieldy for simple opacity adjustments, but it enables some unique results.

PagePlus has much to recommend it, and few serious flaws. It won't satisfy dedicated publishers or graphics agencies; some important features are absent, such as support for vector clipping paths on images, and you can expect some sucking of teeth when submitting files to printers. Still, it's outrageously cheap, and you can tackle a wide range of everyday DTP tasks without too steep a learning curve. **CS**

SUMMARY

- ✓ Lots of features at a great price
- ✓ Useful templates to get started
- ✗ Not robust enough for pros

DTP SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000, XP or Vista, 256MB RAM, 496MB disk space
DETAILS www.serif.com